

Oceans apart

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

I can't help noticing that we the retro-gaming fraternity are very fond of 'where are they now?' articles. You'll find these are totally tunnel-visioned in that they always concern *people*, of all things. What about the gaming-related *buildings* of yesteryear? Where did *they* go next, and what became of *them* once our significant others departed their hallowed grounds?

Rest assured (I know you were panicking!), today I'll be setting the record straight by taking a trip down memory lane to visit the former offices of Manchester-quartered, games developing and publishing luminaries, Ocean Software.



'Spectrum Software' as they were originally known was founded in 1982 by David Ward and Jon Woods and their offices were initially situated in the Ralli building on Stanley Street, a former bonded warehouse that was also used to store props for Granada's TV soap, Coronation Street. However, following the producer's decision to manage their own props in-house, the building was demolished. I believe Ocean were given fair warning beforehand!

It was always intended to be a temporary arrangement lasting only six months, just long enough for the new headquarters at 6 Central Street to be completed. What set these premises apart from the crowd is that they were actually designated as a site of historical interest; a Quaker friends' meeting house dating all the way back to 1828. Ocean were never an organisation known for 'walking the line' so you'd hardly expect them to rent a slick, corporate, new-build construction fashioned of mirror glass, and furnished with automatic taps and Dyson Airblade dryers...

well not until much later on anyhow when the wheels kind of fell off, so to speak.



Of course, the Mancunian gaming Goliaths are no longer with us today, and the building has long since been re-purposed. Precise details of how Ocean were wound up - and *why* - are sketchy at best, and those in the know remain tight-lipped. What we *can* say for certain is that in 1996 they entered into an arrangement with the French holding company, Infogrames, which involved a figure of up to £100m changing hands. Some assert that Ocean were 'acquired' by Infogrames, whilst others talk of a 'merger'. Nevertheless, in 1998 they were re-dubbed 'Infogrames UK', unceremoniously flushing down the toilet many years of prestigious brand recognition and goodwill.

Infogrames subsequently swallowed up Atari and in 2004 ditched their own moniker to capitalise on the cache of their bordering-on-sacrosanct insignia. Thanks to Infogrames' reverse Midas touch influence, Atari too are now but a shadow of their former selves. Their forsaken staff consists of merely ten people, and they now solely operate within the perfidious realm of the 'social casino gaming industry'. Oh dear.

It may come as a shock to learn that the meeting house building remains right where it always was, lodged between

the junction of Mount Street and Central Street in Manchester city centre.

Today the site primarily offers meeting rooms and conferencing facilities for hire, though also rents offices to small businesses housed in the basement 'dungeons' in which the Ocean games developers and play-testers were formerly imprisoned... erm, I mean gleefully attended for the love of the job. A lame joke of course given that the vast majority of them revelled in the 'Ocean Experience' (look it up).

Amongst the organisations to usurp Ocean are the Alternatives to Violence Project, Object A art gallery, the RAPAR human rights charity, a Transcendental Meditation group, Central Manchester Osteopathy & Sports Therapy, the Greater Manchester Talent Match Agency and Intercity Accounting.

The Common Word writer's development group still have a buzzer outside the Mount Street entrance, yet apparently have already relocated to Oldham Street over on the other side of Piccadilly.

Is anyone really interested in this? I'm going to move swiftly on.

Working in Spinningfields I walk past the Quaker building twice a day, five times a week, so thought it was about time I took some pictures of this retro-gaming Mecca, monkeyed with them a bit in Photoshop and shared them with all you lovely people, so without further ado...



The main entrance and steps where the exalted group photo was taken in 1988. David Ward's office would have been above the front door on the upper floor.



Photographic evidence that the street had - and still has - a name, and that it is 'Central' ...he says realising too late that captions aren't actually mandatory.



The side Central Street entrance used by the lowly developers and other 'non-suits'.



The rear-view facing the Central Library located in St Peter's Square. Just beyond that, Manchester looks like a bomb has hit it - it's permanently undergoing redevelopment.



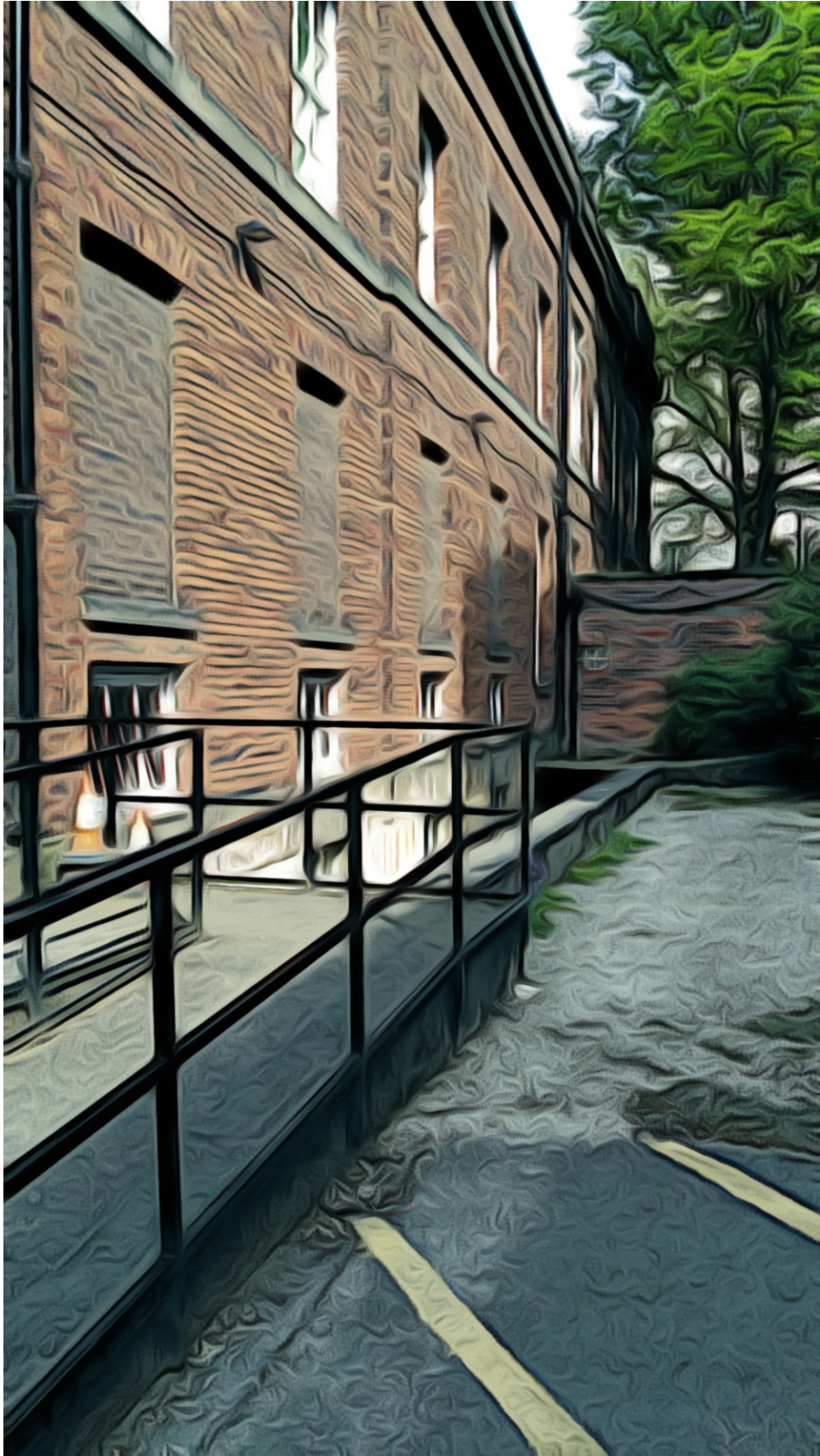
The Bootle Street side of 6 Mount Street. It all gets very confusing.



The Bootle Street entrance leading to the new businesses and charities.



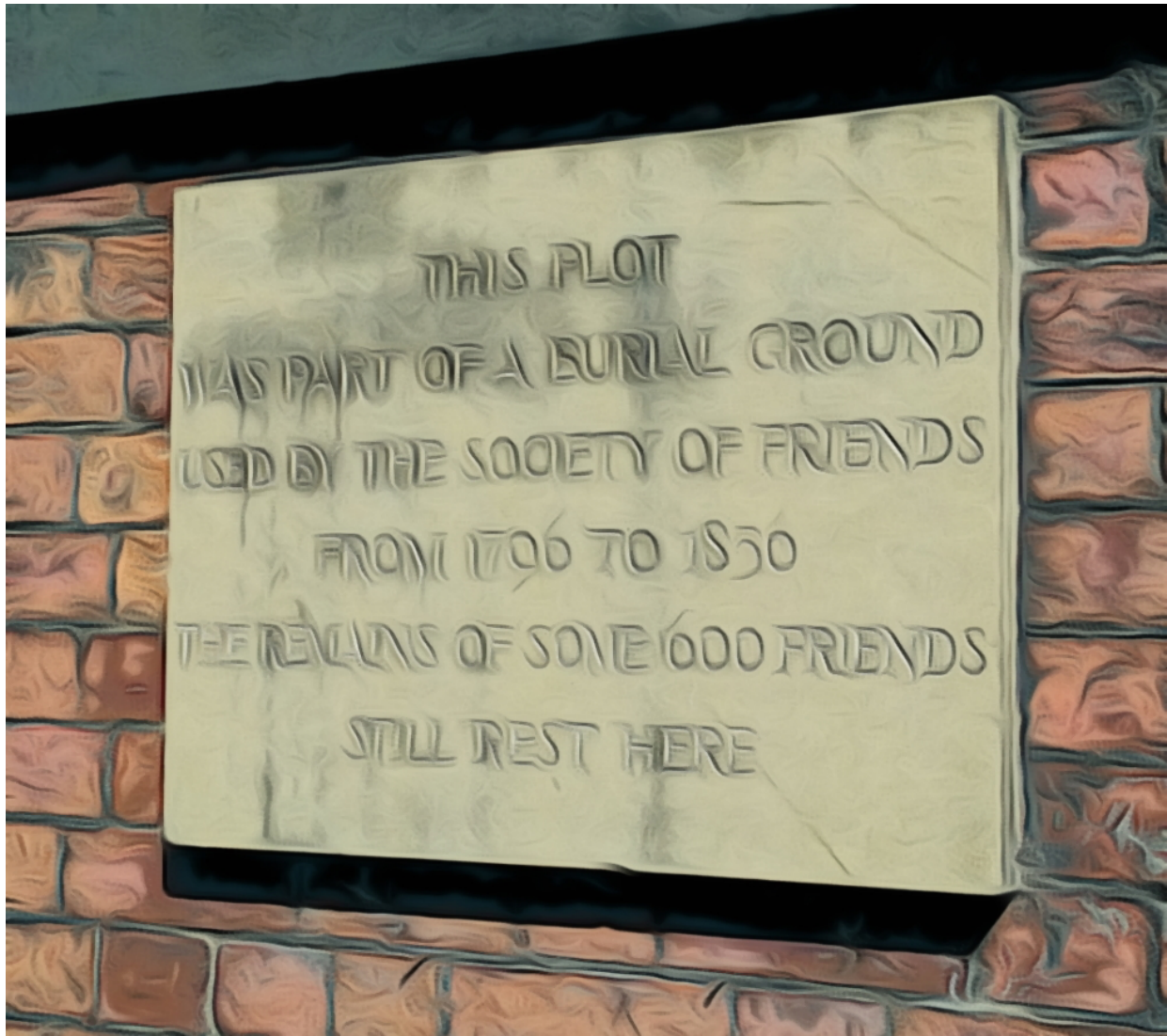
A man paying to park his car ...oh, and some landmark or other in the background.



*Here I trespassed on private property, risking life and limb,
and eluding the rabid Quaker guard dogs to bring you this
shot of the inner grounds. I'm sure you'll agree it was entirely
worth it.*



As above. The treacherous pit of white-hot magma (just out of shot as it happens) was no match for my sleuthing nous.



Rather than relocate the bodies to make way for the car park, the ancient graveyard was cemented over.

Chemist, meteorologist and physicist, John Dalton, is buried here fact fans! In 1993 Ocean packed up their trunks and said goodbye to the circus, relocating to brand-spankin'-new, plush, corporate offices based at 21 Castle Street, Castlefield, overlooking the Manchester ship canal where numerous

Coronation Street scenes have been filmed over the years. I bet the *new* occupiers have Dyson Airblade dryers *now*.



My next mission (yes, I've already chosen to accept it) is to get some snaps of the interior of the meeting house. I fear a long trench-coat, a trilby and dark glasses may feature significantly in my not-too-distant future... possibly a Go-Go-Gadget Copter too, who knows?

As promised, today I returned to the former Ocean Software HQ based in Manchester's Quaker Friends' Meeting House to pap its inner sanctum.

Eschewing all concern for my personal safety I managed to breach the building's sophisticated security protocols through a combination of social engineering, misdirection and a crowbar ...oh and a spot of cold-blooded murder. I know Quakers are pacifists, but sometimes you've just got to live a little, and keep your mind open to new experiences.

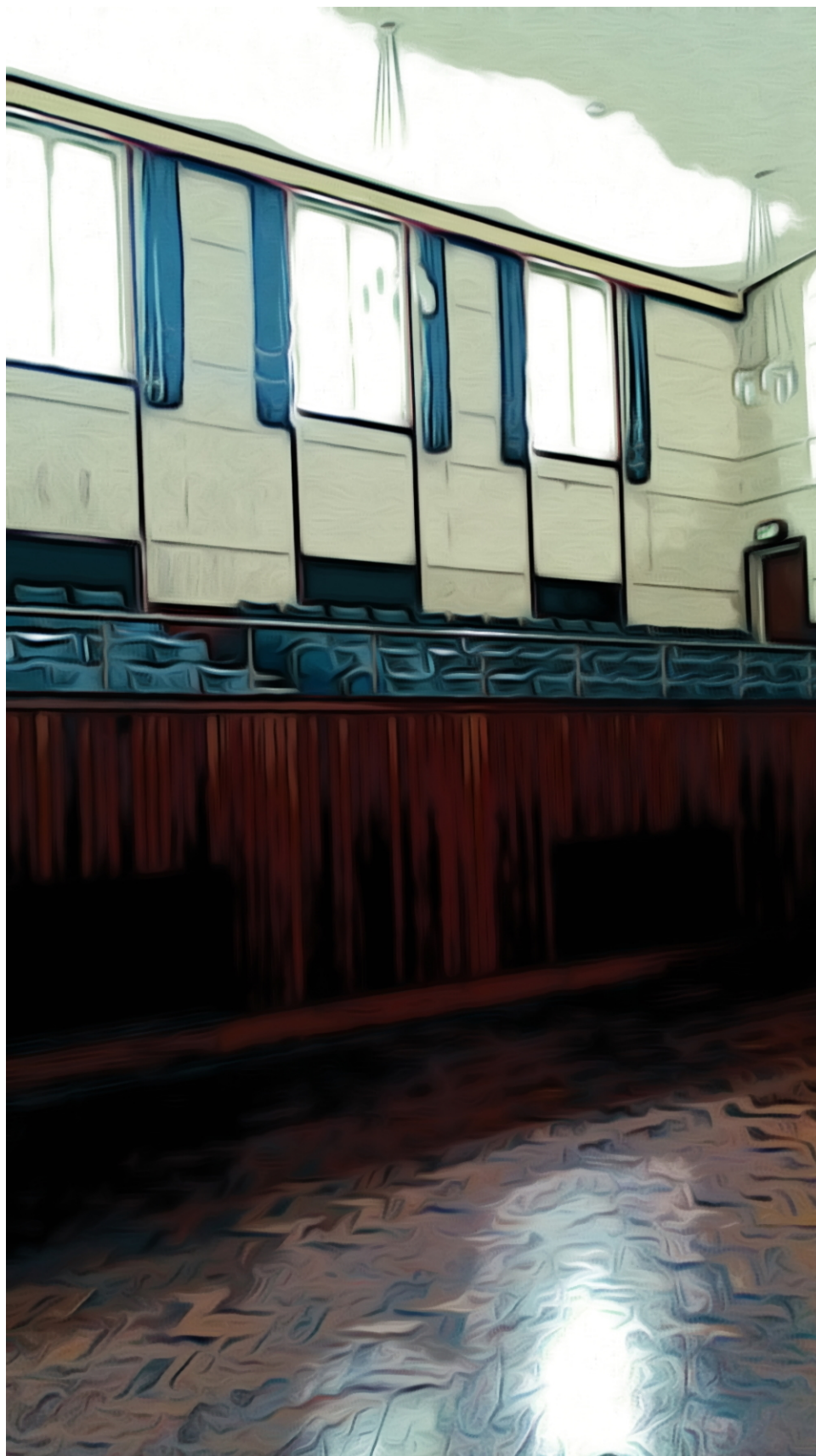
Fear not, I wore a prosthetic, dual-sided Aaron and John face mask so as to evade capture should I be caught on any CCTV cameras.



My glamorous assistant, Gizmo, demonstrates how to get there.







The ground floor atrium leading to the lower conference rooms and main hall. Note the fancy fairy cakes - they must have been expecting me.



Not all the gravestones were buried under concrete to make way for the car park. These remnants can be found above the Bootle Street entrance to the side of the building. No-one was home.







The former office of Ocean co-founder, Dave Ward, and what would have been his view of Mount Street and the Central Library across the street. This is the precise spot where he offered me a million-dollar contract to produce my gaming magnum opus. I had to play both parts and I was 23 years too late, but still.



The Central Street developer's entrance.



*The door developers would have used to reach the
'dungeons'. No idea what that sign means.*



The corridor leading to the 'dungeons' from the Bootle Street entrance... or is it on-board the Deathstar during a nuclear holocaust?

I'm saving the best until last, and another day. To be continued...

Welcome to the third and final instalment of my aquatic retro-gaming pilgrimage to the former Ocean Software headquarters located in the Quaker Friends' Meeting House on Central Street in Manchester. This time I'll be going sub-oceanic, delving deep beneath the iconic building into the developer's dungeons to walk eye to eye with the forlorn spectres who haunt the ominous, ancient Quaker burial ground.

Ocean are most fondly remembered for being the team who accomplished the impossible; they enabled us to actually *play* as the characters we watched with gob-smacked reverence on the cinema's big screen. They brought Hollywood into our bedrooms and handed us the clapper-board.



Our local Manchester division developed in-house some of my all-time favourite Spectrum and Amiga games such as Addams Family, RoboCop and Parasol Stars, yet also

published a deluge of classic titles for other developers, the highlights for me being Push-Over, New Zealand Story, Rainbow Islands, Midnight Resistance, Sleepwalker, Wizkid and Worms.

No less venerable, their French counterparts were renowned for creating some of the most polished and competently coded titles ever to grace the Amiga platform; Toki, Pang, Liquid Kids and Snow Bros. to name-drop a few.



*The exit to Bootle Street. You see how it got its name now?
Unchanged since 1828... probably.*



Outside the 'Alternatives to Violence Project' office. Invoking dim and distant memories of some point and click adventure game or other, I picked up a few brochures from the rack to roll up and use as a kosh in the event of security getting physical.



*I clock the location of the nearest fire escape, and
extinguisher. Safety first kids.*



It was like that when I found it, honest!



The very, actual, gen-u-ine staff refuelling station frequented by Mark R. Jones, Martin Galway, Jonathan Dunn, James Higgins, William Harbison, Matthew Cannon, Dawn Drake, Bill Barna, Mike Lamb, Jon O'Brien, John Palmer, Robert Hemphill, Paul Hughes, Allan Shortt, Simon Butler, Peter Johnson, Jonathan 'Joffa' Smith et al. No offence to anyone I left out, it definitely wasn't intentional.



I know 'rustic' has its charm, but are there really no decorators left in Manchester? A Gomez statue and gold plaque wouldn't go amiss either!



The 'Object A' art gallery. This is what passes for an exhibition these days. I'm not kidding.

I'd like to end with a teaser for the follow-up, but I'm not sure what's left to explore. Is anyone into grave excavation? I also spotted a ladder leading to the roof...